Footage in the Sky: The Truth Behind NASA's 'UFO' Videos

A batch of raw footage from decades-old NASA missions shows zipping lights and strange objects in the sky. This footage, recently posted on YouTube, is renewing UFO conspiracy theories that the government is hiding knowledge about its interactions with intelligent life. Here, two astronauts talk about NASA's supposed coverup and what these clips really show.

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The scenario goes like this: Its 1996; you're an astronaut and you're looking at a UFO. This is quite possibly the biggest, most game-changing scientific discovery in the history of mankind. And here you are, gliding through space in low Earth orbit, watching this alien craft dance around your video camera's viewfinder. You are not alone--there are other astronauts onboard the space shuttle, and mission control is watching the live feed from Houston. Yet not a single raised voice or mention of ETs or UFOs can be heard on the audio of this recording. Apparently, it's just another routine brush with extraterrestrial life, and another day in the life of a massive, decades-long, multiagency coverup.

This is the claim behind the recent posting of a batch of NASA-related clips on YouTube, presented as evidence that extraterrestrials are among us. The footage covers a number of missions, and a range of mysterious objects--in a clip featured on the science fiction blog **io9**, a bizarre object rotates within the frame, seeming to morph from one shape to another as the cameraman casually tracks it. If that weren't mysterious enough, at one point, a light drifts by. The post's headline poses the question: "Will the US Government Finally Admit There Are Aliens?"

Whether or not the government has anything to fess up about aliens, the astronaut who shot that particular piece of footage has nothing to hide. Mario Runco was a mission specialist on board STS-77, a space shuttle mission that launched in May of 1996. One of the crew's objectives was to deploy an experimental satellite, the Passive Aerodynamically Stabilized Magnetically Damped Satellite Test Unit (PAM-STU). The PAM-STU was roughly the size of a trash can, and was designed to test a new approach to satellite maneuverability, using the planet's magnetic field to perform attitude adjustments (instead of firing thrusters). The crew filmed the spinning satellite for days, but in the clip posted on YouTube by Martyn Stubb, the PAM-STU appears in grainy, low-light-enhanced black and white. Its two Stimsonite reflectors--the same materials used on road and bicycle reflectors--catch the ambient light, and at one point appear to merge into a single bright spot as the satellite turns head-on. "The lights moving by in the background are either isolated lights on the ground or stars, I think likely the latter," Runco says.

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Astronauts test the PAM-STU.

In another of Stubb's posted clips, a view through the window of a space shuttle shows lights drifting along in space, then reversing direction and darting away with a flash. The title of that clip: "UFOs quickly take off on NASA video." Again, the reality is less dramatic. Thomas Jones, a former shuttle mission specialist and payload commander and co-author of *Planetology: Unlocking the Secrets of the Solar System*, was on that mission--STS-80, which also took place in 1996--and provided this description of the footage. "A few ice crystals or flakes of thruster residue in the near field are floating by, get hit by a thruster exhaust plume and zip out of the scene."

[youtube]http://www.youtube.com/v/oufEpzbnkRg&hl=en&fs=1[/youtube]

Ice crystals hit by the thruster exhaust plume.

UFO proponents tend to dismiss official responses from members of NASA, the Pentagon or any other government agency, but Runco says that even if there was an active coverup, no amount of coercion could prevent an astronaut--himself included--from laying claim to a confirmed sighting of an alien spaceship. "If I thought it was an intelligent craft, I'd be the first one to speak up," says Runco. "I'd want the credit: Mario Runco was the first person in history to conclusively document the existence of an extraterrestrial civilization. Why would I ever want to keep it secret?"

Neither Runco nor Jones have any illusions about the likelihood of dispelling NASA-related UFO myths, particularly when Stubb and others are able to collect and repurpose an ever-growing catalog of footage. "There's no way to keep people from using public domain footage for silly purposes," Jones says. "If a shuttle beams back 10 hours of Earth views each day, there are bound to be images and scenes that are misunderstood or taken out of context." If anything, it's the lack of context that many UFO theories and proponents rely on. The clips posted by Stubb and others, whether they originate with NASA or a less credible source, tend to be framed only by a short title, with little or no attempt at

reporting (Runco notes that anyone could have simply e-mailed or called him, to ask for his side of the story, instead of simply posting a 13-year-old video and jumping to extraterrestrial conclusions).

Specificity might be the currency of the conspiracy theory set, with seemingly random images or snippets of data woven into a matrix of sinister intent, but even a casual investigation of each of those facts can punch holes in the larger plotline. Bloggers continue to reference an interview with Buzz Aldrin in 2005 about seeing a UFO while on Apollo 11, while brushing off his claims that television producers blatantly quoted him out of context. And although UFO proponents have welcomed recent public statements from former astronaut Edgar Mitchell about his belief in an extraterrestrial coverup dating back to Roswell, Mitchell has never said he witnessed anything alien with his own eyes.

Lacking quality in their evidence, UFO believers are left with quantity, a rambling collection of indistinct imagery and allegations that now includes a batch of space shuttle mission video clips that were never buried or classified in the first place. Runco points out that astronauts, in general, are excited by the notion of intelligent species on other worlds. "Many of them use SETI@Home [a distributed computing application that picks through radio telescope data for incoming messages] as their screensavers, because they think it's a possibility," he says. But it's one thing to believe that alien life is a statistical likelihood, and another to interpret lights in the sky as intergalactic contact. "People see unexplained things," Jones says. "I used to believe UFOs were spaceships--when I was 14."